



Julia 'The Oracle' Sinelnikova at Vector Gallery. PHOTO: RAMSAY DE GIVE FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL



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Inside Vector Gallery in lower Manhattan, a creation of artist Jonathan Friel, who goes by the name J.J. Brine. It is a neon-and-silver space, he says, 'where anything could happen.'

## From Speechwriter to Art-Scene Provocateur

By Matt Vazsony

In 2010, Jonathan Friel moved to Manhattan's East Village, settling on a St. Mark's Place apartment mainly because Nick, the onetime Velvet Underground singer and a favorite of his, once lived there.

Mr. Friel didn't know many people in the city, having spent the past few years wandering around the world, he said. "I was going where I felt compelled to be."

It was the beginning of a reinvention to the downtown provocateur he is today: J.J. Brine, an

artist and gallerist known for his use of religious imagery, decadent parties and friendship with Amanda Bynes, a former child star who has become a tabloid fixture over the past year.

Vector Gallery is his neon-and-silver space on an otherwise standard Chinatown block. Inside, mannequins, dolls, bright lights and ladders are strewn about, and young artists gather there in the evenings for wine and Ouija sessions.

Last December, one of his more exotic installations—a naked performance artist, Lena Marquise, charging cellphones

with her body—went viral when an Instagram photo showed the R&B star Usher checking it out at Art Basel Miami Beach. The singer declined to comment on the work for this article.

In April, Mr. Friel exhibited at Silent Barn, an art-and-music venue in Brooklyn's Bushwick neighborhood.

"To me, he is just the prince of darkness," said Alison Sirico, a curator at Silent Barn. "I don't know anything about him, but at the same time I am not really interested, because I feel like his persona is really who he is."

Mr. Friel, 31 years old, didn't

always run in these circles. About a decade ago, he worked for former national-security adviser Brent Scowcroft—"probably not the target audience for my work," Mr. Friel said—at the American-Turkish Council. A letter of recommendation Mr. Scowcroft wrote for him in 2007 said the "substantive speeches" Mr. Friel helped write "required no substantial editing."

A spokeswoman for Mr. Scowcroft confirmed he signed the letter. A spokeswoman for the American-Turkish Council said Mr. Friel interned there.

Now he joins a long line of art-

ists who have remade themselves in Manhattan, said Bruce LaBruce, an independent filmmaker who also works under an alias.

"I invented an alternate persona that was deflecting all kinds of personal issues, and keeping my work separate from my family," Mr. LaBruce said. "Now people call it branding, I suppose."

Mr. Friel seemed to thrive in his previous career, but he has other plans for himself. "No one feels one way about something for a lifetime," he said.

New York seemed to be the right "empty canvas" for him. Please see ARTIST page A1



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U.S. | NEW YORK | NY CULTURE

## Provocateur J.J. Brine Stirs Up New York Art Scene

Vector Gallery, playing host to exhibitions, parties, is a place 'where anything could happen'



Jonathan Friel, who goes by the name J.J. Brine, at Vector Gallery in Manhattan. *PHOTO: RAMSAY DE GIVE FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*

By **MIKE VILENSKY**

May 12, 2015 5:18 p.m. ET

In 2010, Jonathan Friel moved to Manhattan's East Village, settling on a St. Mark's Place apartment mainly because Nico, the onetime Velvet Underground singer and a favorite of his, once lived there.

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Mr. Friel, 31 years old, didn't always run in these circles. About a decade ago, he worked for former national-security adviser Brent Scowcroft—“probably not the target audience for my work,” Mr. Friel said—at the American-Turkish Council. A letter of recommendation Mr. Scowcroft wrote for him in 2007 said the “substantive speeches” Mr. Friel helped write “required no substantial editing.”

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“I invented an alternate persona that was deflecting all kinds of personal issues, and keeping my work separate from my family,” Mr. LaBruce said. “Now people call it branding, I suppose.”

Mr. Friel seemed to thrive in his previous career, but he had other plans for himself. “No one feels one way about something for a lifetime,” he said.

New York seemed to be the right “empty canvas” for his next act, he said. Plus, there was that long-held love for Nico.

Mr. Friel overhauled his life and moved to the city five years ago, working as an





Montgomery 'Monty' Harris at Vector Gallery. PHOTO: RAMSAY DE GIVE FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

electronic musician and using the name J.J. Brine.

He found a devoted if niche audience. A review of his second album, “The

President of Mozambique,” on the music blog Symbiotic Reviews hailed it as “extraordinary,” and in a nod to Mr. Friel’s often-confusing background, it incorrectly referred to him as a reclusive Icelandic actor.

All of this was leading up to a new project: “a gallery,” he said, “where anything could happen.”

“I have a tendency to go on long rants about religion, business, education, government, politics,” Mr. Friel said. “I think that’s what’s happening at Vector—that complete synthesis of all things. It’s really an all-sweeping paradigm.”

He opened Vector in its current location last year, hosting exhibitions and parties. Shortly thereafter, Mr. Friel said, he met Ms. Bynes at a McDonald’s restaurant in Brooklyn, and they became fast friends. They have been photographed together leaving nightclubs, strolling around Los Angeles and grabbing takeout.

“There is a carnival under the banner of her name that serves all sorts of purposes, and I have been absorbed into the media carnival,” Mr. Friel said.

Ms. Bynes appeared in movies such as “She’s the Man” and became a social-media phenomenon last year when her Twitter account took a lurid turn, earning her comparisons to everyone from “Prozac Nation” memoirist Elizabeth Wurtzel to the outré filmmaker John Waters.

She is now in Los Angeles keeping a low profile, said people familiar with her whereabouts. A family attorney for Ms. Bynes declined to comment on her relationship

with Mr. Friel.

Bynes fans and celebrity-gossip outlets have questioned if Mr. Friel's friendship with Ms. Byones is in her best interest. A Life & Style article on the subject concluded with a quote it attributed to one of her former friends: "Amanda's in real trouble."

Others see them as the perfect artistic pairing.

"Here's this totally mysterious person, and you don't know where he comes from or what his background is," said Whitney Kimball, an art critic who used to live near Vector. "And Amanda Byones is someone who seems to have, one day, totally transformed from her Nickelodeon image. So their friendship makes sense to me."

Either way, the paparazzi attention has brought Mr. Friel wider exposure.

"I love that Amanda Byones is hanging out in the art world!" said Cat Marnell, a writer and fixture on the downtown party scene, who counts herself among Mr. Friel's fans.

"I love J.J. Brine," she added.

The fashion designer Andre Landeros Michel bought one of Mr. Friel's lightbox collages, he said, and hung it in his kitchen, adding that the artist is a "genius." (Mr. Friel said his lightbox collages retail for around \$3,000.)

In Miami, "he upstaged virtually all of Art Basel," said Mr. LaBruce, "which is funny, because the most high-profile artists in the world were there."



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Now Mr. Friel is growing weary of the spotlight. Or, at least, tired of his latest act. In April, he said he

was planning to close Vector for good this summer.

For now the gallery is “alive,” he said, “but I won’t be running it or going inside anymore.”

He left New York for vacations elsewhere and said he hopes to open a new gallery in Los Angeles soon.

For the young art-world operators Mr. Friel associated with in New York, he will leave much how he arrived: enigmatically.

Ms. Sirico, the Silent Barn curator, was touring Vector when Mr. Friel invited her into the gallery’s backroom. A sign on the door read that her soul was the cost of entry.

“There was a little voice in me that was like, ‘Maybe I’m actually going to lose my soul, and this is the devil’s playground and I’m not taking it seriously enough,’ ” Ms. Sirico said

After that, she was sure she should book him. “It was so inspiring,” she said.

**Write to** Mike Vilensky at [mike.vilensky@dowjones.com](mailto:mike.vilensky@dowjones.com)

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